

Editor's letter

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If you zoom in on Nevada's notorious Area 51 on Google Maps, you will see a couple of runways and a collection of ordinary buildings on the edge of a great salt flat. That salt flat, Groom Lake, shows up as an almost featureless block, making you wonder if it might somehow be shielded from satellites until you realize it is just reflecting the light that falls on it. And that's exactly what the long saga of Area 51 does, too: It reflects back every wish and suspicion thrown at it.

In this week's torrent of news, the revelations about Area 51 (see *The U.S. at a Glance*, p.7) can easily get lost. That's too bad, because thanks to excellent reporting from *The Wall*

Street Journal we now have answers to many questions that have floated around for decades. Did the military make up UFO stories to hide secret military projects for years? You bet! Did glowing cones really appear above the Nevada desert? They sure did—in totally terrestrial experiments devoted to studying the effects of powerful electromagnetic pulses.

But the part of the *Journal's* revelations that really got to me was this: Many of the military officers who worked at Area 51 were the victims of an elaborate practical joke. On arrival, they were told of a top secret "Yankee Blue" program to re-engineer extraterrestrial technology, and that they could be prosecuted or even executed for talking about it. This resulted in a string of officers genuinely convinced that the Air Force had acquired alien technology. And the joke—essentially a hazing ritual—persisted for decades.

I can see how officers stuck in the desert would have thought it was funny to make up a story about UFOs, never imagining it would become a national obsession. It turns out that Area 51 was in fact the scene of an unsettling experiment, not in extraterrestrial warfare but in human psychology. Given the right cues and circumstances, it's frighteningly easy to get people who should know better to fall for a preposterous story—especially one that reflects back what they want to believe.

Mark Gimein

Managing editor